

MOVIES

Flames of Conscience

On May 17, 1968, Fathers Daniel and Philip Berrigan and seven other peace activists burned draft records at Catonsville, Md. Their trial formed the basis of a play by Dan Berrigan, **THE TRIAL OF THE CATONSVILLE NINE**, which is now a film produced by Gregory Peck and directed by Gordon Davidson.

By simulating news footage of the draft-board raid, by cutting in lunch-break strategy sessions between the defendants and their lawyers and by splicing in footage of destroyed children and soldiers to indicate the horror that prompted the Berrigans to action, Davidson has attempted to avoid the feeling of a filmed play. But that is what this movie remains, a celluloid road show of a stirring dramatic reading, drawn from the courtroom transcripts.

Its strengths and weaknesses are still those of the original play. It is lyrical but not dramatic, since the sentences—two to three and a half years in the penitentiary for all nine defendants—are a foregone conclusion, and the opposition in the form of a pragmatic, passionless government prosecutor and a sympathetic, baffled judge are not the hostile figures of the more recent Harrisburg trial that would have given this drama the spirit of an adversary proceeding.

Moral: Instead, the defendants, all persuasively played—from Ed Flanders's impassioned, puckish Daniel Berrigan to Richard Jordan's angry, loquacious George Mische—recount the personal paths that led to Catonsville. One defendant watched the CIA line up against popular revolution in Latin America; Phil Berrigan forged his moral imperative among the oppressed blacks in America while Dan was driven to act after visiting the wreckage of North Vietnam.

The eloquent language of their testimony becomes the riveting action of the film itself, which is a valuable document if only for bringing its provocative moral challenge to a wider audience. Regrettably, it has not dated. Every word applies as perfectly to the idiotic horror of Vietnam today as it did when the testimony was given four years ago. "We can't talk peace while our deeds give the lie to our words," says Father Phil. "How many must die before the world hears our words?"

—PAUL D. ZIMMERMAN

*See also The Trail of the
Catonsvillians Nine*

P-Zimmerman, Paul D.